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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

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Intelligence Memorandum

THE COMMUNIST TET OFFENSIVE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
31 January 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Communist Tet Offensive

Summary

The current series of coordinated enemy attacks in South Vietnam appears designed for maximum psychological impact and to demonstrate the Communists' continued power despite the presence of strong US forces. The Communists clearly have made careful preparations for the offensive. These preparations point to a major assault in the Khe Sanh area possibly in conjunction with a drive throughout the northern I Corps area, and widespread attacks against US installations may be preparatory to or in support of such action. The enemy probably hopes to score some major battlefield successes during their campaign. Their military actions appear related to Hanoi's recent offer to open talks, but it is questionable that the Communists are making a final desperate bid before suing for peace.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs.

1. The current coordinated series of enemy attacks in South Vietnam, so far targeted primarily against population centers and US installations from I Corps to the delta, appears primarily designed for maximum psychological impact. The Communists appear to be trying to demonstrate to the South Vietnamese, to US and world opinion and probably to their own forces that, almost three years after the intervention of US forces, they can still enter major towns and bases, threaten the US Embassy itself, and seriously disrupt the country, if only temporarily.

2. Extensive harassment of US airfields, logistical centers, and command and communications centers appears--in addition to its shock effect--partly designed to inhibit immediate allied reaction and retaliation. It may be preparatory to or intended to support further impending enemy actions in the Khe Sanh/DMZ/northern Quang Tri area. So far this area has been relatively quiet during the latest round of attacks, but the enemy concentration in this area remains the most ominous in the country.

3. Evidence has been building up for the past several weeks that the Communists intended a major nationwide offensive in connection with the Tet season. Enemy propaganda, however, had stressed an intention to honor a seven-day cease-fire regardless of the period of the allied standdown. This line may have been intended to enhance the surprise factor of attacks on the day of Tet itself. It may also be that the Communist timetable--in past years calling for stepped up action just prior to and immediately following the Tet truce--was sufficiently flexible to call for action during the Tet if the allies could be put in the position of apparently bearing the onus. In any event, Communist propagandists were clearly ready with the line that the enemy attacks were "punishment" for allied violations.

4. It is clear that the Communists made careful and, most recently, urgent preparations for the current offensive. These preparations seem to

point, in coming days or weeks, to a major assault around Khe Sanh, possibly in conjunction with a campaign throughout the northern I Corps area. The Communists probably hope, in addition to psychological gains, to score some dramatic battle-field successes, ideally (from their standpoint) the overrunning of Khe Sanh or a US withdrawal from this or some other key garrison. In launching a series of bold actions, they incur the risk of serious defeats or retaliation, with possible repercussions on their own forces. Nonetheless, they probably hope to gain the strategic initiative and to pin down substantial numbers of allied troops over wide areas in which the Communists hold some military advantages. A major objective of the entire Communist "winter-spring" campaign since autumn appears to be to draw off US forces while the VC attempt to erode the pacification effort through guerrilla-type actions. Furthermore, the Communists certainly hope to make political mileage out of heightened US casualty rates and a demonstration of continued VC strength.

5. There seems to be little question that the present Communist offensive activity bears a relation to Hanoi's recent offer to open talks. Foremost, the Communists probably hope to improve their political and military image in the event that any negotiations are initiated in coming months. Prior to the initiation of the "winter-spring" campaign, Communist forces throughout the country were intensively indoctrinated on the importance of the campaign. At least in some areas, the campaign itself was linked, directly or by implication, to the possibility of a political settlement. Some of this indoctrination may have been propaganda intended to instill a victory psychology among troops possibly discouraged by hardships and talk of "protracted war." Although the current surge of Communist activity involves both a military and political gamble, it is highly questionable that the Communists are making a final desperate effort for a show of strength prior to suing for peace. Despite evident problems of manpower and supply, enemy forces continued to display improved fire-

power, flexibility of tactics, and a considerable degree of resiliency. Their current offensive is probably intended to convey the impression that despite VC problems and despite half a million US troops, the Communists are still powerful and capable of waging war.